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ABSTRACT

The purpose of a five-week pilot project in composition at a Manhattan inner city high school were to test a methodology for teaching the nonnarrative essay and to determine if students could provide informed editorial guidance to other students in regular peer criticism sessions. The assumptions underlying the approach are that the central instructional task is the idea toward which the writer must adopt an interpretive posture, that the idea sentence (an analogic assertion) then becomes the thesis statement, that writing competence can be increased through acquisition of editorial skills, and that rhetorical instruction is best provided in an editorial context. Students first learned to identify analogic assertions and to recognize unity, coherence, and emphasis (without using these terms). The method was comparative and inductive. The students then progressed through a series of editorial activities, helping one another through their editorial efforts and increasing their own writing (and reading) skills. Results of this project show that if written discourse is considered as thought that is shaped and designed, directed and controlled, there is no child who lacks the conceptual resources to engage in the task. (Examples of student essays are included.) (JM)

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Leonora Woodman

Creative Editing: An Approach to Peer Criticism

The approach to peer criticism that I shall outline this afternoon is part of a pilot project in composition that I am currently conducting at the Louis Brandeis High School in New York City. The project is designed to teach the structure and organization of the non-chronological essay. It has a number of components, but the one on which I shall focus is the series of editoral activities I have developed in connection with peer criticism.

Peer criticism has become a deservedly popular feature of many writing programs. Teachers report that students enjoy writing for each other and that they are eager for the comments of their peers. They also suggest that the editorial aspect of the activity actually improves students' writing skills. However, no programs that I have seen suggest that the editorial activity requires any special introduction. The assumption seems to be that students will pick up editoral skills incidentally as they become more proficient in their own writing and as the teacher and text provide additional guidance.

At first glance the acquisition of editorial skills would seem to coincide with traditional instruction in paragraphing, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling and so on. If students are to provide informed guidance to other students, they obviously need to be able to distinguish these aspects of writing and to determine whether they have been used appropriately and skillfully. Hence it would appear that the traditional training provided by most rhetoric texts may serve as the prerequisite for informed editorial guidance.

My own view is that if we wish students to duplicate what editors really do, we need a very different methodology for teaching rhetorical matters. Language instruction that relies on the rhetoric text is not an adequate

CS 802 418

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introduction to the editorial activity because it ignores the most significant aspect of the composing process, namely, the writer's purpose and the audience which he is addressing. Its a-rhetorical nature consequently encourages the student to view language as a codification of abstract linguistic norms rather than as a functional vehicle that the writer adapts to his expressive needs.

In contrast to the abstract and discrete nature of traditional rhetorical instruction, the editorial act is holistic and organic. Although an editor is often considered an expert proofreader, his major task, as we all know, is to assess the writer's rhetorical skill in integrating form and content, style and substance. Consequently, he begins with the whole rather than with the parts. He first reads to determine the writer's purpose and to grasp his total design, if, indeed, he has one, and only then does he question the parts to see whether and how they contribute to the whole. His judgment, in other words, is based on the total communicative process instead of on individual particles divorced from any conceptual framework.

If an editor views language as organic and integrated, it seems to me that we should attempt to duplicate his perspective in the classroom before we ask our students to engage in the editorial act. Specifically, I suggest that we teach rhetorical skills through the vehicle of the total essay rather than through the particles of language on which we now depend. I know this seems a tall order. After all, the essay seems so intractable when one considers the complex matters that enter into the writing process and to which the editor needs to be alert. The question that immediately arises is: How can we ask our students to evaluate a complete essay if we don't first separate these complex matters and teach them individually and separately outside the context of the essay? The answer, it seems to me, is that we don't at first seek total

evaluation but that instead we isolate specific rhetorical features and teach them in a rhetorical context. If, for example, our purpose is to teach the importance of the key idea as a unifying device, then it is to this feature that we ask students to direct their attention when examining an essay and not to spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, etc.

Teaching rhetorical skills in a rhetorical context is, however, only a part of the methodology I propose. Another aspect, equally important, is that students be given the opportunity to recognize a specific rhetorical feature inductively, without prescriptive and injunctive exhortation. One way to encourage students to discover how language may be used appropriately and gracefully is to use a comparative methodology that distinguishes between the deficient and the excellent, the mediocre and the superior. What I am recommending is that we teach rhetorical skills through a comparative evaluation of the same student essay in first and final draft. I stress that the essays be student essays, for only these have the ideas, rhythms, syntax, and diction familiar to the adolescent and hence he is more likely to recognize their strengths as well as their failings. Moreover, the revision can provide him with a model that he can confidently approximate. I also recommend that each editorial activity be prefaced by an introduction alerting the student to the skill he is evaluating and advising him to read both drafts with an eye to the way in which the specific skill does or does not appear.

When the student has completed his reading and has evaluated the specific feature he has been asked to examine, the teacher may direct him to discussion questions that ask him to examine some of the essays' features more closely. The discussion questions I have in mind are comparative, focusing on the way in which the same idea appears in both the first and final draft. They should

also encourage the student to articulate for himself the changes that have occurred. In this way observation and discovery within a rhetorical context replace description and injunction within an a-rhetorical context.

The final step is to provide the student with an unedited essay that has the same rhetorical problem as the preceding first draft. In this way the student directly applies the editorial skill he has learned to an essay written by an anonymous peer.

I want to share with you now two of the editorial activities I've prepared in connection with my pilot project. Before I launch into a discussion of their specific features, I want to repeat that the editorial skills I've singled out are those relating to the structure and development of the non-chronological essay. Years of teaching on many grade levels have convinced me that non-chronological sequence is by far the most formidable and least understood mode of written discourse. Hence, the skills I've isolated are those needed in non-chronological discourse, namely, a precisely stated key idea; adequate, effective and relevant support for the key idea; and the logical arrangement of ideas.

I have used essays written by junior high school students as examples of the first draft. I deliberately chose essays from this level because I felt that students who are being introduced to editorial skills need to examine a piece of writing that is relatively uncomplicated, one that will not present formidable problems in language and idea. However, as uncomplicated as these essays may be, they nevertheless exhibit rhetorical skills present on any level. My assumption is that once a student grasps the skill, he may, with ease, recognize it in another, perhaps more sophisticated, context.

I should note that the essays have been edited. Because I wanted the

student-editor to concentrate on the larger rhetorical features, I deliberately eliminated errors in spelling and punctuation. I did, however, remain faithful to the student-writer's syntax and diction. These are, despite minor emendations, authentic examples of student writing. I should also note that the revisions were sometimes written by the student, sometimes by me. When I did the rewriting, I again sought to duplicate the rhythms and syntax of the original and to use whenever possible the sentences that appeared in the first draft.

I want now to look at the first editorial activity: "Does the Essay Have a Key Idea?" (See Attachment I). I begin with this rhetorical feature because to my mind it is the single most important aspect of the non-chronological essay. It is the hub to which all the spokes attach. If the essay has no key idea, it is useless to focus on paragraphing, style, mechanics. These matters rightly concern us, but they are of secondary importance, since it is only as they illuminate the central idea that they can be evaluated and defined.

The introduction to the first editorial activity alerts the student to the skill he is evaluating and asks him to read the essays with this skill in mind. If the student has not recognized how the writer has amended his first draft, the discussion questions are designed to help him. The first discussion question directs attention to the opening sentence of <u>both</u> essays, asking students to discover the nature and presence of a key idea. It is, in other words, comparative, in keeping with the methodology I have outlined. My assumption is that students will readily recognize the presence of a key idea in the revision simply by noting that the opening sentence of the first draft provides a purely factual description of the writer's subject, whereas the first sentence of the revision provides an evaluation of or a judgment

about the subject. I should note parenthetically that students participating in the project will have been prepared for this distinction through oral activities that help them to see the difference in their everyday speech between propositional and factual statements.

Once the student recognizes the presence of a key idea in the revision, he should be able to grasp quickly the nature of the other changes. Questions (2), (3), and (4), for example, direct attention to the difference in the way physical description is used in both essays. Note that they do not in any way specify the nature of the difference but instead encourage the student to determine for himself the changes that have taken place. If the student has recognized that Debbie's boisterousness is the controlling idea of the revision, he should be able to recognize that the physical description is appropriate only if it is related to Debbie's dominant quality. Similarly, he should be able to see that the key idea present in the revision accounts for the difference in the title and concluding paragraph of each essay.

The next editorial activity,"Does the Essay Have a Precise Key Idea?" helps the student to recognize that although a essay may seem to have a key idea, that key idea may not account for the content of the essay. (See Attachment II). This editorial activity is a good example of how the editor has to proceed. In the first draft the student-writer uses the word greatest to characterize her Siberian Husky, but her account of her dog stresses that he is different from other dogs and not that he is better than other dogs. However, the student-editor cannot grasp this failing until he has read the first draft through. Only as he reads it from beginning to end can he recognize that the announced purpose of the writer does not coincide with her actual performance. And I suggest to you that traditional rhetorical instruction

rarely provides the opportunity for this kind of editorial judgment.

If the student does not at first see that the essay lacks a precise focus, the discussion questions will help him, again by directing his observation rather than by instructing him explicitly. Note that the first question directs the student to a number of sentences in the first draft and asks him to find their common idea. All of the sentences imply that Boris, the Siberian Husky, is a maverick. By examining these sentences in their rhetorical context, the student can quickly note that their shared idea is Boris's difference from other dogs, a recognition that suggests the essay's true focus.

Questions (7) and (8) direct the student's attention to the way in which the student-writer has corrected the lack of coherence in the first draft by using a transition in the revision. However, the terms transition and coherence do not appear in the question. Abstractions like these are seldom needed in a holistic and comparative methodology because the context itself will demonstrate clearly and dramatically the problems that these terms are meant to summarize. Ultimately it matters less that the student cannot name his perception than that he be able to recognize it operationally, that is, as it functions in a total rhetorical context.

If the method I've outlined is successful, it will permit the teacher to teach rhetorical skills in a rhetorical context, it will help the student to improve his own writing skills while training him to provide editorial guidance to others, and it will relieve the teacher of the total burden of evaluation. For those of us who have struggled with the writing component of the English program, such help is sorely needed.

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Attachment I

EDITORIAL ACTIVITY I

DOES THE ESSAY HAVE A KEY IDEA?

One of the first things an editor looks for in an essay is its key idea. He seeks a focus or a center that holds everything together. He knows that without a key idea, the essay will ramble; it will perhaps have a great deal to say but it will not show how the ideas are related to one another.

In the first draft of the essay that follows, the writer does not develop a key idea. When her editor pointed this out to her, she was able to find an idea that would hold her essay together and she incorporated it into her revision.

Read the first draft and, without looking at the revision, see if you can discover what the writer's key idea could be. Then see if your idea was used by the writer in her revision. The questions that follow will help you to see some of the changes the writer made.

FIRST DRAFT

My Friend Debbie

I (1) My friend Debbie is about five feet tall and is thirteen years old. (2) She has a good complexion and light skin. (3) She has dark, long, wavy hair which she parts in the middle most of the time. (4) She has dark eyes, thick eyelashes, and long eyebrows. (5) When she laughs or smiles, her eyes squint and all you can see are her eyelashes. (6) She has a small, pointed nose. (7) She has a big smile and dimples. (8) She wears braces and her front teeth are uneven. (9) She is thin and weighs ninety-seven pounds. (10) On her right leg she has a big scar from where she had stitches.

II (1) Debbie is very friendly and is always laughing and talking. (2) She is like a radio station with non-stop music 24 hours a day, but she's non-stop talking 24 hours a day. (3) What a headache she can give you! (4) She is fun to be with, but she can be very impossible, sometimes. (5) When she loses her temper, she'll put the blame on someone else. (6) When she gets mad, she kicks hard and will act rough. (7) She has a big mouth and likes to yell a lot. (8) She is left-handed and bites her nails.

III (1) Debbie is always looking her best and is always well dressed. (2) She loves jewelry and will always wear earrings, rings, bracelets, and necklaces.

REVISION

One is a Crowd

I (1) There's never a quiet moment when my friend Debbie is around. (2) Most of the time she's friendly and is always laughing and talking. (3) But sometimes she can be mean. (4) Either way, she creates a racket the moment she walks into a room.

II (1) When Debbie feels friendly, she is like a radio station with non-stop music 24 hours a day, but she's non-stop talking and laughing 24 hours a day. (2) What a headache she can give you! (3) Her laugh sounds like the blast of a diesel horn. (4) She opens her mouth wide and you can see the dimples in her cheeks and the braces on her teeth. (5) Her dark eyes squint and all you can see are her thick eyelashes. (6) Her small, pointed nose will wrinkle and sometimes it's hard to tell whether she's angry or happy.

III (1) When Debbie loses her temper, she sounds like a crowd of boxing fans. (2) She'll yell and scream at the top of her lungs. (3) Sometimes she'll even kick, grunting excitedly every time the kick lands. (4) When she gets rough, you'd never guess she weighs only ninety-seven pounds. (5) Once I saw her beat up a boy twice her size. (6) She was so fast with her scratches and kicks that he couldn't even find her to hit back. (7) When the fight was over, she blamed him for starting it, but I saw that she began the kicking when the boy wouldn't move up the stairs fast enough. (8) That's her way, though. (9) She's always blaming someone else for her hot temper.

IV (1) Debbie is as noisy and hot as a firecracker. (2) And just like a firecracker, she can be fun to play with if you're careful and don't mind the commotion.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What difference do you see in Sentence (1) of each essay? Does Sentence (1) of the revision provide a key idea for the essay? What is it?
2. Find the physical description of Debbie in both drafts. How does it differ? Why?
3. Has any of the physical description been omitted from the revision? Why?
4. Has any physical description been added to the revision? Why?
5. What difference do you find in the concluding paragraphs of both drafts? Why do you think the writer changed the concluding paragraph of her revision?
6. Why do you think the writer omitted Paragraph III of the first draft from her revision?
7. In Paragraph III, Sentence (1) of the revision, the writer tells us that Debbie sounds like a crowd of boxing fans when she gets angry. Why does this comparison appear in the revision and not in the first draft?
8. Examine the titles of both essays. Why do you think the writer changed the title of the revision?

YOU ARE THE EDITOR

FINDING A KEY IDEA

The essay below lacks a key idea that would unify all the details. Help the writer to develop a key idea that would structure the essay. You may find an idea for a key idea in Paragraph II.

If you can, rewrite the first paragraph so that it contains a key idea. Then see if you can provide the first sentence of each subsequent paragraph.

JAY

Jay is about four feet tall when his shoes are off. He is six years old and weighs fifty-five pounds. He looks skinny but he really isn't. Jay has blond hair and blue eyes. He has short bangs in the front of his face and looks like Jerry Lewis. When Jay is watching Batman or Mister Rogers on the tube, his eyes become as big as apples and start to sparkle. Jay is very peculiar. He has a pale face, big ears, big lips, huge hands, and big feet.

Sometimes when Jay is at our house and my sister and I are playing ping-pong, Jay uses those big hands to grab the ball. Then he'll step on it with those big feet. Most of the time Jay smells, but to get him to take a bath is like trying to move a mountain. Every time you put him in the tub, he just climbs right out of it and drips all over the rug. In school Jay acts rough. He always pushes people around, wrecks other kid's projects, and calls everybody names like dirty rat, hot dog, bad boy, and sometimes meatball. The only food Jay will eat is hot dogs and Spaghetti O's. He has no manners so sometimes while he's over, he takes one piece of spaghetti and licks the sauce off. After he slops it up, he puts it back in the bowl. He always spills his milk and tries to cover his mistake by stepping in it and then walking on the carpets.

Attachment II

EDITORIAL ACTIVITY II

DOES THE ESSAY HAVE A PRECISE KEY IDEA?

An editor, as you have seen, always looks for a key idea in the essay. He also checks to see if the key idea is precisely stated. He knows that if a key idea contains words like greatest, nicest, and most wonderful, the writer will often stray from his subject. Words like these are too general. They can apply to so many situations and actions that they offer no guidance to the writer as to what should or should not be included in his essay.

In the first draft of the essay that follows, the writer uses as her key idea the assertion that her dog is the greatest Siberian Husky anyone could ever want. However, the word greatest does not really account for the ideas that follow. When her editor pointed this out to her, she was able to find another adjective that stated her idea much more precisely. She substituted this adjective for greatest in her revision.

As you read the first draft, try to discover an adjective to replace greatest that would be a more precise evaluation of Boris, the Siberian Husky. Also try to determine how this adjective could apply to the various aspects of her subject that the writer treats.

The discussion questions that follow the two essays will help you to see how the writer developed a precise idea in her revision and how she was able to connect the various aspects of her subject to this key idea.

FIRST DRAFT

The Greatest Dog to Have

I (1) Boris is the greatest Siberian Husky you ever wanted. (2) He is very friendly and wouldn't hurt a flea. (3) He's as tall as I am when he is standing on his hind legs and is really soft and furry. (4) His coat has black, white, and a little silver in it. (5) You would expect a Siberian Husky to be rough and tough because he is so big, but Boris does not like to be tough unless it's cold out. (6) Boris is kind of tough when it's cold out and you play with him. (7) Last year I had a hat with a pom-pom on top and now the pom-pom is only half the size it was when I got the hat. (8) The reason for this is that when Boris and I played outside, he nipped at the pom-pom and pulled out one strand at a time. (9) Most dogs bark and whimper but not Boris. (10) He puffs and yipes. (11) When I say puff, I mean a sound like a bark and a yipe put together. (12) At dinner time he usually puffs because he's hungry. (13) And when he hears a loud bang from a firecraker, he yipes. (14) All the dogs I know will eat right away when you put the dish down. (15) But Boris didn't. (16) He'll wait until you are out of sight before he will eat.

II (1) I think that dogs should be the boss of the animals in the house in such a way that nobody picks on them. (2) But since our other dog Jerry died, our mother cat Buttons has taken over Jerry's job in being head of the animals in our house, even though Boris is stronger than she is. (3) The only time Boris shows his strength is when he wants to play. (4) Then he'll put his foot on Button's back and hold her down. (5) But while he's doing this, he'll start licking her.

III (1) I think Boris is really a great dog to have, even if he is a pain sometimes.

REVISION

A Dog That's Different

I (1) Boris is a Siberian Husky, but he is not like most Siberian Huskies. (2) You would expect a Siberian Husky to be rough and tough because he is so big (Boris is as tall as I am when he is standing on his hind legs). (3) But Boris is very friendly and wouldn't hurt a flea. (4) However, he can be rough when he plays outside during cold weather. (5) Last year I had a hat with a pom-pom on top and now the pom-pom is only half the size it was when I got the hat. (6) The reason for this is that when I played with Boris outside in the cold, he nipped at the pom-pom and pulled out one strand at a time.

II (1) Boris is not only unlike most Siberian Huskies, but he is unlike most of the other dogs I've ever seen. (2) Most dogs bark and whimper, but not Boris. (3) He puffs and yipes. (4) When I say puff, I mean a sound that's like a bark and yipe put together. (5) At dinner time he usually puffs because he's hungry. (6) And when he hears a loud bang from a firecracker, he yipes.

III (1) Boris doesn't eat the way other dogs eat. (2) All the dogs I know will eat right away when you put the dish of food down. (3) But Boris doesn't. (4) He will wait until you are out of sight before he will eat, and while he's eating, he'll watch out of the corner of his eye to make sure he's alone.

IV (1) Boris also isn't the boss of the other animals in the house the way most dogs are. (2) When our other dog Jerry died, our kitten Buttons took over the job of being the head of the animals in our house, even though Boris is stronger than she is. (3) But Boris doesn't seem to mind. (4) The only time Boris shows his strength is when he wants to play. (5) Then he'll put his foot on Button's back and hold her down. (6) But while he's doing this, he'll start licking her.

V (1) Some people like their dogs to be all alike. (2) But I like dogs that are different, and that's why I'm especially fond of Boris.

DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONS

1. Look at Paragraph I, Sentences (5), (9), (14) and (15) of the first draft. What idea do these sentences share? Does the word greatest in the opening sentence of the first draft express this idea?
2. What idea does the writer substitute for greatest in the revision? Does this become the key idea of the revision?
3. Look at the first sentence of each paragraph in the revision. Is the key idea stated in each of them? How? What aspect of her subject does the writer treat in each paragraph?
4. In the first draft, part of Sentence (2) of Paragraph I has been made Sentence (2) in the first paragraph of the revision. Why?
5. Look at Paragraph I. Sentence (9) of the first draft. What sentence precedes it? Are these two sentences connected in any way?
6. Where does Sentence (9) in Paragraph I of the first draft appear in the revision? What sentence precedes it? Are these two sentences connected in any way? Are they connected to the key idea? How?
7. Look at Sentence (14) of Paragraph I in the first draft. What sentence precedes it? Are these two sentences connected in any way?
8. Where does this sentence (I, 14) appear in the revision? What sentence precedes it? Are these sentences connected in any way? Are they connected to the key idea? How?
9. Look at the titles of both drafts. How are they different? Which title is a better summary of the writer's ideas?
10. Examine the concluding paragraph of both drafts. How are they different? Which one is a better summary of the content of the essay? Why?

YOU ARE THE EDITOR

DOES THE ESSAY HAVE A PRECISE KEY IDEA?

In the essay below, the writer begins with a vague key idea that does not adequately account for the details that follow. Help him to develop a key idea that will structure the rest of his essay. To do this, examine the essay carefully to determine the writer's actual ideas. Then develop an opening paragraph that will alert the reader to what will follow.

Pedro

Pedro is a super dog. He belongs to my neighbor across the street. When I ask him for his paw, he will obey. When he sees his owner pick up his car keys, he will run outside and stand beside the car, ready to take a ride.

When I am sad or when I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, Pedro will walk quietly beside me with his head down, as though he were bearing the weight himself. On the other hand, whan I feel happy and lighthearted, his step is lighter and quicker; he almost seems to dance around me. When I am angry, he'll growl and paw the ground, as if he were getting ready to attack an enemy.

Pedro hunts for little animals like chipmunks, rabbits, field mice, and squirrels. He is a beautiful, muscular dog. When you pet him, you can feel his ribcage. It's like feeling smooth bumps. I think I love Pedro. When he runs to greet me, when I am coming home from school or wherever I have been, I feel waves of warmth coming from him. And then I feel a shiver of pleasure. I guess that's love.